

Glimpses of the Unthinkable: Anamorphic Images of World War III in Philip K. Dick, Thomas Pynchon, and J.G. Ballard

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Abstract

The representation of modern warfare has always been problematic, but depicting nuclear war seems to be an almost impossible task for writers, inasmuch as a real nuclear conflict has never taken place, so that there is no “real” model that writers may refer to. And yet in the Cold War years the threat of WWII was such an important and urgent issue that fiction writers repeatedly attempted to stage the unreal war, and think the unthinkable. Some of them adopted a mix of the extrapolative strategies of science-fiction and conventional, “realistic” narrative protocols; others, such as Thomas Pynchon, Philip K. Dick, and J.G. Ballard, though also using science-fictional extrapolations, opted for more unconventional narrative strategies, drawing from modernism or devising new devices. This article attempts to survey what the consequences of these different approaches have been.

Keywords: nuclear war, W.W.III, Thomas Pynchon, Philip K. Dick, J.G. Ballard, H-bombs, postmodernism.

One of the earliest books discussing the representation of the Third World War in fiction, cinema and the other arts was Paul Brians’ 1987 annotated bibliography *Nuclear Holocausts*, which offered a survey of narratives dealing with nuclear wars from 1895 to 1984.¹ Unsurprisingly, most of the novels and short stories listed by Brians belong to the science fiction genre: since we have fortunately not yet experienced the unthinkable,² that is, a full-scale nuclear war, no writer, filmmaker, or artist can draw from his/her own experience to picture what the predicament of humankind might be if H-bombs were dropped or Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) were launched. Writers can of course research their fictions, drawing from speculations on what total nuclear warfare might be, even if there is no empirical verification of those speculations (Cordle 46).³ Hence, all those writers who have attempted to tackle nuclear war have been compelled to adopt the imaginative practices of science fiction writers, mixing whatever technical or scientific knowledge was available with guesswork, projecting future or alternative realities in a fictional game whose results may look less alien than the faraway planets

¹ Other critical surveys of nuclear war literature are quoted in this chapter; see also the July 1986 special issue on ‘Nuclear War and Science Fiction’ of *Science-Fiction Studies*.

² It was Herman Kahn who repeatedly referred to nuclear war as ‘The Unthinkable’ in his controversial essays *On Thermonuclear War* (1960), and *Thinking About the Unthinkable* (1962).

³ Besides, some of those speculations turned out to be biased or totally counterfeit (Piette 9-10).

or the remote futures depicted by science fiction authors, but are produced by similar projective devices nonetheless.

Hence the genre theorist may argue that whatever work of fiction deals with a small- or full-scale nuclear exchange that actually takes place in the fictional reality it depicts belongs to science fiction, regardless of how it was labelled when it was first published—no wonder then that a bestseller like Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* [1957], which was not published as 'science fiction,' was nonetheless included in John Clute and Peter Nicholls' *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (890).

We may conceive science-fiction as that area of the fantastic which deals with the impact of hypothetical technologies on individuals and societies; or that kind of narrative dealing with our world by presenting us alternate worlds to be interpreted as anamorphic images of ours;⁴ or that literary genre that deals with certain quasi-scientific devices (such as time travel, aliens, or artificial intelligence) affecting the narrative architecture of a text—whatever definition of science fiction (or eclectic mix of these definitions) we may prefer allows us to accommodate nuclear war fiction.

But the inclusion of fictional nuclear wars in science fiction posits a major problem. Frederic Jameson, discussing the treatment of nuclear war in several novels and short stories by such an iconic science-fiction writer as Philip K. Dick, noticed that these devastating conflicts are often no more than a device allowing the writer to conjure up a very different future Earth (349-50). What applies to Dick's novels (with a remarkable exception, as we shall see) also applies to many other science-fiction narratives: to depict a society that is quite different from ours, a writer may set his story on another planet, or remain on Earth but set the story in a future world utterly changed by a planetary catastrophe, such as a nuclear war. A good example is John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* (1955), set in a post-apocalyptic Labrador a thousand years in the future, where nuclear war remains only as the faded memory of an ancestral past, used to explain the existence of the mutants at the heart of the story. Such narratives are less interesting to us than the smaller group of those works "depicting a conflict and its immediate consequences" (Brians 54); if we are looking for testimonies of how nuclear war was depicted in the Cold War years, narratives like Theodore Sturgeon's 1957 story "Thunder and Roses," where the bombs have just fallen, and Americans are dead or dying due to radioactive fallout, are surely more rewarding.

There is another problem, however, that arises when dealing with nuclear war narratives: to what extent can fiction represent in a convincing fashion such an unreal event as WWII? Representing war has never been easy, and modern warfare has only increased those difficulties (Rossi, *Il secolo di fuoco* 45-62), but representing a virtual nuclear conflict, even using the techniques that are typical of science fiction may be even more challenging. Moreover, those techniques can be coupled with at least three different narrative approaches, as the author can tackle nuclear war by using (a) a 'realistic' approach respecting the narrative protocols of literary

⁴ Anamorphosis is a concept derived from the visual arts, which is here used to define how non-realistic modes of representation may nonetheless offer a deformed—yet readable—image of historical reality.

realism (that is, a more conventional strategy), or (b) a non-realistic approach, drawing from modernist techniques (e.g. non-linear plots, linguistic inventions, stream of consciousness) or (c) post-modernist ones, which do not only include the metafictional games *à la* Jorge Luis Borges or John Barth, but also anamorphic representation, hybridisations with other media, and/or ontological uncertainty.⁵

Among the novels characterized by a traditional, realistic approach to the unreal war, three stand out: Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*, Peter Bryan George's *Red Alert* (1958),⁶ and Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler's *Fail-Safe* (1962). These fictions were all commercially successful, repeatedly reprinted in the 1960s and adapted for the screenplay of three major Hollywood productions, two of which were remarkably successful in terms of number of viewers and diffusion outside the United States. They are images and narratives of the Third World War that were sold to the general public—and, to a certain extent, influenced the collective imagination in the Western World.

But bestsellers adopting a conventional approach are just a part of the overall picture. There are literary texts that are definitely not conventional: texts belonging to forms of niche literature, or characterized by such unconventional narrative strategies that they are only appreciated by a minority of readers. These books, however, may offer extremely interesting depictions of WWII and nuclear warfare. Hence, this chapter will also deal with an explicitly science fictional novel, Philip K. Dick's *Dr. Bloodmoney* (1965), for a long time popular only among science-fiction readers; a bulky, unconventional cult book, today acknowledged as a contemporary classic, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973); and a surrealist short story, J.G. Ballard's "The Terminal Beach" (1964), whose author is widely considered to be one of the major stylists in recent British literature. It is interesting that two of the three authors, Dick and Ballard, started their career as science fiction writers, while Pynchon first found his readers in another niche readership, college students during the countercultural wave of the late Sixties and early Seventies.

The following discussion will briefly deal with the three 'realistic' novels, showing how the more conventional approach chosen by the authors forced them to steer clear of a direct representation of the nuclear holocaust itself, while the non-realistic, unconventional narratives dare show nuclear war (even in a garbled or fragmentary fashion) and bring readers near it, albeit in a metaphorical fashion.

⁵ This is a concept which I derived from Fredric Jameson's analysis of the postmodern, and used in my monograph on the fiction of Philip K. Dick, where I maintain that "when [ontology] is used in the realm of literary criticism it necessarily assumes a different meaning: it is the critical meditation on the nature of being, existence or reality, as well as the basic categories of being and their relations, *as they are found in a piece of fiction*. We might say that it is an ontology *sui generis*, a mutant variety of ontology adapted to the needs of literary criticism when it has to tackle the works of some writers," in particular postmodernist novelists (Rossi, *The Twisted Worlds of Philip K. Dick* 10).

⁶ *Red Alert* was originally published in the United Kingdom as *Two Hours to Doom* (1958), under the pseudonym Peter Bryant, then in the USA as *Red Alert*. After the release of *Dr. Strangelove* in 1964, George also wrote a novelization of the movie.

Of course, this comparative reading does not aim to indicate what is the most reliable representation of nuclear war: the Third World War has not been experienced, but hypothesized, extrapolated, or projected in many different ways according to the scientific knowledge available at that moment and the political agenda of those who attempted to picture it—hence it is unproductive to try to measure the plausibility of the imaginary wars these novels let us glimpse by comparing them to such a shifting, mutable and multi-faceted virtual projection. Yet these are all—as we shall see—tell-tale narratives.

1. Conventional narratives of the Apocalypse

On the Beach should be understood as a post-nuclear-war novel: when it begins the bombs have already fallen on most of the Northern Hemisphere, and Southern Australia is one of the few still inhabited parts of the Southern one. The rest of the planet has been sterilized by radioactive dust, which is slowly being scattered by the winds, so that the few survivors know that they are doomed. Even though people in Melbourne go on living as if there were a future, the government has already prepared suicide pills to be distributed for free at chemist's shops.

Critics tend to highlight the pessimistic ending of *On the Beach*, with the final suicide of the protagonists when they begin to show the symptoms of radiation poisoning (Jacobs 72): this is seen as a powerful monitory tale about the danger of nuclear brinkmanship and the risks of nuclear proliferation. But other commentators have noticed the nuclear war is never described in detail (Evans 149), as we are only told (not shown) that the first nuclear bombs are dropped by the small Balkan country of Albania, and then the rest of the Northern Hemisphere follows suit in a sort of military chain reaction (Shute 11). Interestingly, the film adaptation of the novel, directed by Stanley Kramer, was also criticized for its representation of nuclear war's effects, or better their absence (Shapiro 92-93): San Francisco is shown deserted but intact, without the destruction that can be expected after the bombs have fallen (while the novel briefly describes a ravaged city whose Golden Bridge has collapsed [Shute 179]). The state of the art of special effects in 1959 may well explain why Kramer decided to renounce a direct representation of the nuclear bombings or the ruins of the metropolises; but Shute did not have such limitations.⁷

The other two novels are not interested in the aftermath of nuclear war, but in its eve. This is what we have in *Red Alert*, and the title of the UK edition, *Two Hours to Doom*, perfectly summarizes its approach. The story begins when Brigadier-General Quinten, a SAC bomber base commander, sends his B-52s to attack the Soviet Union with hydrogen bombs: his logically developed plan is based on the premise that the Russian will attack the USA as soon as they have a superiority in terms of ballistic missiles, and that this attack can only be averted by striking first (Bryant 75-81). But the apparent reasonableness of Quinten's decision is belied by the fact that the USSR has built the "ultimate deterrent," what would be later called the Doomsday Machine (67), a device that would detonate several H-bombs as soon as the USSR is hit by nuclear weapons, scattering a cloud of radioactive cobalt particles all over the world, in a situation

⁷ Though on focusing on the effects of fallout Shute may have had quite important motivations (Cordle 77-78).

almost identical to the one depicted in *On the Beach*. No wonder then that the two superpowers, represented by their presidents, must cooperate to stop the bombers. Meanwhile, the crew of the *Alabama Angel* heroically strives to complete their mission and drop their bombs on their target against all odds, unaware that their success would lead to the extinction of humankind.

Red Alert became famous worldwide with the immense success of the film based on it, Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, released in 1964. The differences between the movie and the novel are quite interesting to us: *Red Alert* ends with the success of those who try to avert the Third World War, so it entails no description of the nuclear holocaust. On the other hand, *Dr. Strangelove* ends with the annihilation of humankind due to the explosion of the Doomsday Machine and the subsequent no-holds-barred nuclear conflict between USA and USSR to achieve "mineshaft superiority" (i.e. to have more deep underground shelters where the ruling elites of each superpower may survive the radioactive dust blanket); Kubrick elegantly solved the problem of showing the war by ending his film with a sequence of explosions from footage of nuclear tests (thus suggesting that the Bomb was already there).

Fail-Safe is a political thriller with several science-fiction elements apart from the war itself, for instance the supersonic Vindicator bombers and their sophisticated systems of self-defense. The plot has remarkable similarities with *Red Alert*: a group of nuclear bombers attacks the USSR due to the malfunctioning of a complex computerized network that should prevent accidents with nuclear weapons. The two world leaders, the anonymous, young U.S. President (resembling John F. Kennedy) and the Soviet Premier Khrushchev, must cooperate to prevent the bombers from reaching their targets, because if their H-bombs were dropped, the Soviet leader could not avoid launching a massive nuclear retaliation: his "people would liquidate any leader who allowed the destruction of Moscow [the main target of the USAF bombers] to go unavenged" (Burdick and Wheeler 263). When it is clear that one of the American bombers will elude the Soviet defenses and manage to drop its bombs on Moscow, the American president offers to send a SAC Vindicator to H-bomb New York, as a compensation for the destruction of the Soviet capital (Burdick and Wheeler 262). Once again, the war is averted, hence we are not presented with a description of World War III.

This seems to confirm Paul Brians's remarks: "[m]ost of those who have depicted nuclear war or its aftermath in fiction have done so in ways that avoid coming to terms with the nature of a nuclear war in the real world" (82). Why such verisimilitude was not pursued by all writers of atomic war literature is only partially explained by Brians' contention that "depictions of nuclear holocaust are too disturbing to appeal to a mass audience" (82). Actually, as in the rest of war literature, the tendency to sanitize depictions of combat or war atrocities may be also caused by other reasons, such as political concerns, insoluble ethical contradictions, or social codes of censorship (Rossi, *Il secolo di fuoco* 24-29, 40-42, 43-62). But there may also be a more 'internal' reason: that the protocols of realistic fiction do not lend themselves to a direct representation of nuclear warfare. We will now see what happens when other, less conventional protocols are applied.

2. Unconventional Depictions of the Nuclear Holocaust

The title of Philip K. Dick's 1965 novel *Dr. Bloodmoney, Or How We Got Along After the Bomb* evidently echoes *Dr. Strangelove*.⁸ The main difference, however, from George's novel and Kubrick's film is that most of the novel, eleven chapters out of sixteen, are set in a post-nuclear-war world: a small community of survivors that lead an Arcadian life in Marin County, California. The first three chapters of the novel describe the daily life of a group of characters in the Bay Area on the day of the nuclear attack, but limited to the hours immediately before the destruction comes from the sky; chapter 5 directly tackles the moment in which the bombs fall and the Bay Area is ravaged; chapter 6 describes the immediate aftermath, when the U.S. Army tries to relieve survivors, and people are starving or dying of radiation poisoning.

The position of the two chapters that cover the nuclear attack is interesting, because they are not placed, as one might expect, between the three set in the few hours before the bombs burst and those set in the post-war world. The novel starts with the daily life in the Bay Area in 1981 (a not-so-near future when *Bloodmoney* was published). Chapter 4 abruptly jumps to a moment seven years after 'the Emergency,' as the survivors have called the nuclear devastation (57). Subsequently, the narration gets back to the day of the nuclear attack and its aftermath in chapters 5 and 6, returning to the post-war community of 1988 in chapter 7.

We are shown 'the Emergency' through narrative foci placed on the characters, and their subjective points of view shape or deform everything—including the nuclear attack—that they see, hear, or feel. The personality of those seven individuals heavily conditions what we are shown: suffice it to say that one of them, Bruno Bluthgeld, a nuclear physicist, suffers from "paranoia sensitiva" (6). He believes he is directly responsible for the nuclear holocaust; moreover, his perception of the passing of time is impaired, so that there are strange effects of time acceleration when things are shown from his point of view (85-86). This gives the description a strongly deformed, dream-like character, as in this excerpt of the novel:

[...] standing there at the intersection, seeing down the side street where it descended into a kind of darkness, and then off to the right where it rose and snapped off, as if twisted and broken, he saw to his amazement [...] that cracks had opened up. The buildings to his left had split. Jagged breaks in them as if the hardest of substances, the cement itself which underlay the city, making up the streets and buildings, the very foundations around him, were coming apart. (60)

But even when the point of view belongs to saner and more balanced characters, the vision of the war is also fragmentary and limited. When the CONELRAD signal is heard, everybody scrambles towards shelters or cellars. Only a deranged individual like Bluthgeld remains on the surface, or someone like Bonnie Keller, a housewife living in Marin County, who lives relatively

⁸ For a discussion of Dick's novel in the context of nuclear war imagination, see Brooker 90-94.

far from where the H-bombs hit. Moreover, the characters are all ordinary people, not the generals or politicians that appear in *Fail-Safe* or *Red Alert*; they are unable to grasp the overall picture. The nuclear bombing also brings about the collapse of all communications networks: without the media, people cannot know the cause of the war, nor if it was a real war or an accident.⁹

The fact that the two chapters covering 'the Emergency' come after one of the chapters covering the life of survivors seven years after the holocaust, may allow us to read that part of the novel as a flashback: the survivors *remember* what happened when the bombs fell. Of course such a recollection has been powerfully impacted by trauma, and undergoes all those complex processes of transformation analysed by Kalí Tal, which entail the shattering of previous frames of reference (Tal Ch. 5).¹⁰ The disintegration is psychological as well, and one of the survivors, Dr. Stockstill, a psychoanalyst, muses: "[i]t was as if the man had been gripped by his unconscious. He was no longer living a rational, ego-directed existence; he had surrendered to some archetype" (67).

Despite its dream-like character and fragmentariness, or rather because of it, Dick's depiction of nuclear war sounds eerily plausible. We are not shown WWII from the vantage point of the White House or some hyper-technological war room—nor is it given from the flight deck of nuclear bombers, but from the streets (and cellars) of a doomed city. The predicament of ordinary people is well represented by that of Stuart McConchie, an African-American salesman who bids time in the basement of a collapsed house in Berkeley, eating rats raw and playing chess with a man who is slowly dying due to radiation poisoning (87-96).

While *Dr. Bloodmoney* offers a 'direct' depiction of nuclear war, the same cannot be said of Thomas Pynchon's postmodernist classic *Gravity's Rainbow*. Set in the last months of the Second World War and in those immediately after the German surrender, the story ends well before the beginning of the Cold War proper and only briefly mentions the bombing of Hiroshima. Moreover, the intricate conspiracy and the complex webs of symbols which structure this open-ended novel are pivoted upon the Rocket, not the Bomb—a different technology, even though it was later used as a vector of nuclear warheads.¹¹ Nuclear war only emerges if we pay attention to scattered details. Interpreters of Pynchon's novel have read its off-putting ending, set in a Los Angeles cinema theatre, the Orpheus, as a sign that *Gravity* is actually the description of a fictional movie—also called *Gravity's Rainbow*—screened in that theatre in the early 1970s (Pynchon 754).¹² This is why the sections of the four parts of the novel are separated by rows of

⁹ One of the characters hypothesizes that "something had gone wrong with an [American] automatic defense system out in space, and it was acting out its cycle this way – and no one could halt it, either" (66); however, this is not confirmed in the remainder of the novel.

¹⁰ The main characters of this novel all undergo a process of psychological transformation triggered by trauma; one of the survivors thinks "[they] have learned a great deal" (57).

¹¹ As for the relationship between Pynchon's treatment of the Rocket and the Cold War, see Collignon, *Rocket States: Atomic Weaponry and the Cultural Imagination*.

¹² A discussion of *Gravity* and film can be found in the seventh chapter of Berressem's *Pynchon's Poetics: Interfacing Theory and Text*. Weisenburger also describes the Orpheus Theatre episode as a prolepsis or forward leap to 1970, but he does not explain why this prolepsis closes the novel (369).

small squares, like the perforations on film stock, and the last sub-section, called “Descent,” begins with the “rhythmic hand-clapping” of the audience, protesting because the projection of the film has stopped—in fact the screen is “white and silent,” probably because “[t]he film has broken or a projection bulb has burned out” (760).

But there may be a less reassuring explanation for the interruption, which can also clarify this obscurely threatening paragraph: “And it is just here, just at this dark and silent frame, that the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t” (760).¹³ This hints at something that should be in the film, not in the frame reality of the movie theatre, that is the 00001 Rocket—actually a modified V-2 or A-4 ballistic missile launched by the arch-villain of the novel, SS Captain Blicero, in the climactic final pages. The hyper-fictional rocket is falling on a fictional Los Angeles movie theatre in what should be the more or less ordinary Californian reality of the late 1960s or early 1970s, the years in which Pynchon was writing *Gravity*, even though the modified V-2 could only have been launched in the last months of the Second World War.

Or is the one falling on the Orpheus another Rocket? In “Orpheus Puts Down Harp,” a previous, mostly comedic subsection consisting of an interview with the movie theatre night manager, Mr Richard M. Zhlub, the conversation between the anonymous reporter and Zhlub, driving in the latter’s Volkswagen along the streets of Los Angeles, is abruptly interrupted by “the sound of a siren” (757) which takes both characters unaware.¹⁴ We are told that “the sound is greater than police. It wraps the concrete and the smog, it fills the basin and mountains farther than any mortal could ever move” (757). The tell-tale detail is the hand of the reporter reaching for the knob of the AM radio: “I don’t think that’s a police siren” (757) he says, and if it is not the police siren it must be the CONELRAD nuclear alert system, easily recognizable as it was regularly tested to teach Americans to identify it. In *Gravity*, however, the spasm in the guts of the reporter on hearing the signal means that this is no test: the missiles are falling like the “bright angel of death” aimed at the movie theatre (757, 760). There are other hints at nuclear war in this subsection, such as the sound effects tapes that Zhlub keeps in the glove compartment of his car, instead of the then usual audio cassettes with music: one of them, rather ominous, is called “FIRE-FIGHT (NUCLEAR),” as opposed to “FIRE-FIGHT (CONVENTIONAL),” or “FIRE-FIGHT (URBAN)” (756). Moreover, while traveling along the Hollywood freeway, Zhlub and the reporter see “a mysteriously canvassed trailer rig and a liquid-hydrogen tanker” (756). Weisenburger identifies this as tractor-trailer rig which might be hauling “a nuclear-tipped ICBM missile [...] and its liquid hydrogen fuel” (382).

¹³ This episode of the novel could have been inspired by a real event, the V-2 missile that hit the Rex Cinema in Antwerp, where about 1,200 people were watching the movie *The Plainsman*, on 16 December 1944; 567 people were killed, the highest number of victims caused by a single rocket during the entire war (Antwerp).

¹⁴ Zhlub is identified as Richard M. Nixon by Weisenburger (382), who hypothesized that the choice of the car is not random, because parts of the V-weapons (the V-1 cruise missile and the V-2 ballistic missile) were manufactured at the VW plants at Fallersleben and Magdeburg.

This should induce us to reconsider other hints at nuclear war scattered throughout the novel. One of them might be the enigmatic Kirghiz Light in part 3, described in the Aqyn's Song sung by an old Kirghiz wandering singer as a deafening roar and a blinding light whose "face cannot be borne" (358): this does resemble an atomic blast, also because the singer complains "the Kirghiz Light took my eyes" (358).¹⁵ Is Pynchon once again short-circuiting historical moments, by having the old wandering singer describing, well before it actually took place, one of the many nuclear bomb tests that were carried out in the Asian territories of the USSR during the Cold War?

The atomic bomb is then less obliquely mentioned in Part 4, when a "scrap of newspaper headline" is described, "with a wirephoto of a giant white cock, dangling in the sky straight downward out of a white pubic bush" (693). This defamiliarizing description of the mushroom cloud is made clear by the readable letters of the newspaper headline, "MB DRO ROSHI," which should be completed as ATOMIC BOMB DROPPED ON HIROSHIMA (Weisenburger 354). Then we are abruptly brought to the site of nuclear annihilation, with the narrator reminding us that "At the instant it happened, the pale Virgin was rising in the east [...] A few doomed Japanese knew of her as some Western deity. She loomed in the eastern sky gazing down at the city about to be sacrificed. The sun was in Leo. The fireburst came roaring and sovereign..." (694).

These repeated references to the bomb may suggest to us that we should read the Orpheus movie theatre as a metaphor of the USA, lost in a mass-media dream of violence, intrigue, death, and sex—a possible summary of the plot of *Gravity's Rainbow*—while the threat of nuclear warfare looms large. While Dick showed us the moment when the missiles hit, but filtered through the fragmentary points of view of his characters, Pynchon—a historical novelist at heart—reminds us that the bomb ended W.W.II, and will be the protagonist of W.W.III. The war won by the USA and their allies fathered the nuclear bomb and the ballistic missile,¹⁶ both expected to be protagonists of the next global conflict, with the latter, the ICBM, seen as nothing more than a perfected form of the Rocket in Pynchon's novel, the Nazi German V-2. Hence, the missile fired in 1945 and falling on an American movie theatre in 1973 is also Pynchon's own way to evoke the transfer of technological know-how that gave us that "abhorrent balance of mutual nuclear terror" (Hobsbawm 249) on which the coexistence of the USSR and the USA was based.¹⁷

Moreover, Pynchon and Dick do something neither Shute nor Bryant nor Burdick and Wheeler had done: they put us readers in the Orpheus movie theatre, where we have watched the

¹⁵ Weisenburger's only comment is that the song is "Pynchon's fiction" (212).

¹⁶ Dick's and Pynchon's novels belong to a different phase of the Cold War vis-à-vis those previously discussed: nuclear bombers prominently feature in both *Red Alert* and *Fail-Safe* but were no more the spearhead of nuclear deterrence, having been replaced by Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles. Pynchon was well aware of this, as he had worked for the missile division of Boeing in the early 1960s, writing technical literature for the Bomarc project, pivoted upon a supersonic missile devised to intercept Soviet nuclear bombers: a very sophisticated weapon that soon became obsolete, being unable to intercept ICBMs.

¹⁷ Cf. Pynchon 693.

film called *Gravity's Rainbow* like the moviegoers in the novel, or in the streets of Berkeley, both targets of the bombs. Thus, we are—metaphorically—the victims of the bomb. And while there is still time to avert the disaster in *Red Alert* and *Fail-Safe*, there is no more time (or just the “last unmeasurable gap [...], the last delta-t”) in the ending page of *Gravity*; and in *Bloodmoney* the bombs fall inexorably. Moreover, the characters of Dick's and Pynchon's novels react with shock and terror, unlike the relaxed, dignified acceptance of death staged by Shute in *On the Beach* (Cordle 75-6).

3. The Third World War as Inner Space

Dick deals with the Third World War with the typical strategies of a science fiction writer, but pushing them beyond the point reached by the authors of *Fail-Safe* and *Red Alert*, and giving his imaginary war a definitely dream-like, surrealistic tonality. The nuclear holocaust takes us to a sort of Arcadia, the small Marin County community struggling to rebuild civilization yet apparently leading a more satisfying life than that of the pre-war world: this tells us that Dick's projection of the reality after the bomb did not aim at realism and plausibility. All in all, nuclear war and its aftermath are to be read more like a dream than a rational extrapolation (Brians 182). But this is a dream that—like real dreams—contains numberless hints at the real world Dick and the earliest readers of *Dr. Bloodmoney* lived in, with the looming threat of nuclear war. Though published in 1965, the novel was completed just five months after the Cuban Missile Crisis.

On the other hand, Pynchon chooses a secondary thread in the tapestry of the past, we might say a preterite story.¹⁸ He does not focus on the Bomb, the American contribution to the making of Cold War and the Third World War, but on the German contribution, the Rocket, designed and built by the nation that was defeated in the Second World War, i.e. the preterite. He is anamorphically representing historical facts, as the quest for the Rocket in a wrecked Germany bears relation to the historical Operation Paperclip, in which the Office of Strategic Studies employed both Nazi secret weapons and German scientists and technicians. Pynchon also treats us to a sort of spy story, with Captain Blicero and the conspiracy about the 00001 Rocket. But then he turns his counterfactual yarn into a film, which is both a deranged counterhistory of the Second World War and a displacement of Pynchon's own years—the countercultural Sixties—to 1945 Germany. This film, however, is framed in the reality of contemporary California, metonymically represented by the Orpheus theatre. These complex games with the alternate past and projected future prevented these two novels from becoming instant bestsellers like *On the Beach* or *Fail-Safe*; no major Hollywood film was ever based on their counterfactual plotlines—yet they go closer to the horror of nuclear war.

However, the theme of psychosis introduced by Dick's novel paves the way to a third narrative which obliquely deals with the Third World War. In J.G. Ballard's short story "The Terminal Island," a man called Traven, whose wife and six-year-old son have died in a motor accident, cuts himself off by reaching the island of Eniwetok, the coral atoll where the USA tested 43 nuclear bombs between 1948 and 1958. In Ballard's text, the Cold War is over; a *détente* has been reached by the USA and the USSR, who have agreed on a moratorium on atomic tests. That "nightmarish chapter of history [has] been gladly forgotten," (Ballard 590) and the island is abandoned. Traven is alone on the ravaged atoll, covered by a network of concrete blockhouses, towers and runways built for the nuclear tests, remains of the Cold War that will be Traven's own shelters. The plot presents us with very few events: Traven is rescued by members of a scientific team, but escapes when he is told that Dr. Osborne, the physician who manages the

¹⁸ The *preterite* is a key concept in Pynchon's fictional universe: the American novelist is always interested in the forgotten chapters of world histories, the discarded scientific theories and technologies, forsaken places, defeated countries and cultures.

team, is going to inform the Navy about his presence on the atoll. A search party comes, but Traven manages to elude them. The story ends when Traven finds the corpse of a Japanese doctor, Yasuda, and has a surreal conversation with the dead man—possibly, given the recurring visions of the protagonist’s dead wife and son, hallucinating the answers of his interlocutor (602).¹⁹

The last paragraph summarizes the story in all its bewildering visionariness: “Patiently Traven waited for [his wife and son] to speak, thinking of the great blocks whose entrance was guarded by the seated figure of the dead archangel [i.e. Dr. Yasuda], as the waves broke on the distant shore and the burning bombers fell through his dreams” (604). Traven’s hallucinations and his decision to remain on the abandoned island—which is practically equivalent to committing suicide—bespeak severe psychiatric problems. In fact, he is obsessed by the Cold War, which he calls “The Pre-Third,” a period “characterized in [his] mind above all by its moral and psychological inversions, but its sense of the whole of history, and in particular of the immediate future – the two decades, 1945-65 – suspended from the quivering volcano’s lip of World War III” (591). The connection between nuclear war and psychosis is stressed by inserting a quotation from the 1947 collection of essays *War, Sadism and Pacifism* by the British psychoanalyst Edward Glover, which reads like a sort of conceptual blueprint to Ballard’s story:

The actual and potential destructiveness of the atomic bomb plays straight into the hands of the Unconscious. The most cursory study of the dream-life and fantasies of the insane shows that ideas of world-destruction are latent in the unconscious mind [...] Nagasaki destroyed by the magic of science is the nearest man has yet approached to the realization of dreams that even during the safe immobility of sleep are accustomed to develop into nightmares of anxiety. (590-91)

Much of the story consists of obsessive and almost hypnotic descriptions of Eniwetok’s landscape, a mix of wilderness and nuclear archaeology, including a dozen carcasses of B-29s, which “lay across one another like dead reptile birds” (592). Since the atomic bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki were dropped by B-29s, we are dealing with the first nuclear bombers, and the only ones to carry out a real nuclear bombing. It is then no wonder that Traven often thinks of “Eatherly: the prototypal Pre-Third Man – dating the Pre-Third from August 6, 1945—carrying a full load of cosmic guilt” (599).

Claude Eatherly was the pilot of the weather reconnaissance B-29 *Straight Flush* that supported the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. He later expressed remorse, had psychiatric problems that led to his hospitalization and was engaged in anti-nuclear activism. For a short time in the early 1960s, this turned the former pilot into a controversial celebrity. Eatherly’s deviant behavior—he forged a check, was convicted for forgery and then for breaking

¹⁹ The presence of corpse itself puzzles Traven, and may be part of his hallucinations, intensified by the lack of food.

and entering a property—started an urban legend around the members of the airplane crews involved in the bombing of Hiroshima. According to the legend, some of them—including Paul Tibbets, the pilot of *Enola Gay*—became insane due to remorse. Thus, Ballard's story stresses the continuity between the nuclear bombings at the end of the Second World War and what followed. This is the meaning of a strange mantra recited by Traven, in which he says goodbye to Eniwetok, then to Los Alamos, Hiroshima, and Alamogordo, and then Moscow, London, Paris, New York, the most likely targets of H-bombs if the Third World War were to break out (601).

Ballard's de-structured narrative reads like an exploration of the collective imagination itself, of the mass media unconscious, where images and names tied to the Second World War or the Third World War appear together. The threat of nuclear war and the places associated with it, from Alamogordo to Eniwetok, resurface in the author's subsequent works, mixed with the pop icons of the 1960s, from Marilyn Monroe to Liz Taylor, and other figures circulating in the media, such as Lee Harvey Oswald or Ralph Nader, or images of the Vietnam War. These are the media ghosts haunting *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), a collection of stories that stem from the experimentation Ballard carried out with "The Terminal Beach". Here too, the Bomb and WWII are part of the picture, or, better, the fresco.

Far from being an isolated case of mental disorder, Traven's predicament mirrors the author's fascination with the bomb and the war that was not there. Traven's self-imposed seclusion foreshadows the story of Roland MacDonald, a Scotsman who entered a vast underground shelter in Troywood, Anstruther, which should have hosted the Scottish Secretary of State and his ministry if the WWII had broken out. MacDonald was besieged by the police for two days, during which he "dressed in the display uniforms, played with the weapons, caused £100,000 of damage" (Piette 1). Another madman trapped in the places haunted by the imaginary nuclear war, like Traven, MacDonald exemplifies Piette's contention that the "Cold War continues to live and thrive within our collective imagination [...] as a paranoid field of fantasies which draw whole populations in their wake" (Piette 2). Ballard suggests that the imaginary wars projected by the writers we have discussed will survive in our collective imagination, in that inner space theorized and explored by the author of "The Terminal Beach," even when the threat of full-scale nuclear war will have been averted once and for all. Eniwetok is at the same time one of the places where the Third World War was rehearsed and an embodiment of the inner space, where the ghosts of the war which never took place still live and thrive.

We can thus read these unconventional nuclear war narratives as individual/collective nightmares which beset the people living in the years of the Cold War, when the threat of nuclear destruction loomed large on the whole planet; at the same time they are the expression of a widespread concern, if not outright fear, inspiring unease, anxiety and anguish in their readers. These virtual apocalypses were projected both on and by the collective imagination. They may be of interest to historians as they are screens—as several critics have suggested vis-à-vis the *oeuvre* of J.G. Ballard – on which collective and individual fears are projected (Cortellessa). But they are also textual surfaces that may hide realities that are too unpleasant or shocking—as in

the trio of more conventional novels—or the inability of the authors and, to a certain extent, the public, to conjure up a plausible image of World War Three.

Of course the term “nightmare” is here used in a metaphorical sense, as real nightmares cannot be shared the same way that novels, though the product of a single person (or a few people if we take into account the intervention of editors), are shared by their readers. Moreover, novels may express the fears and anxieties of their authors, but these may in turn mirror a collective state of mind, something that is in the air (like fallout?) when they are conceived and written. Dick’s, Pynchon’s and Ballard’s postmodernist nightmares, however, manage to show us the unthinkable and somewhat compel us to think it; they push us close to the war which was not there, or well within it.

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